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ABSTRACT

There are two central issues that must be addressed when counseling multiracial and multiethnic children in the United States. The first is that, although the United States is fixated on race, only single-race group membership is recognized. The second issue is that multiracial children growing up in the United States experience a variety of cues that tell them they do not belong and that tell them they are different. For this discussion, multiracial and multiethnic children are defined as those whose parents or grandparents crossed traditional racial and ethnic lines to have children. Among the models that describe the development of racial identity in multiracial and multiethnic children are: (1) M. P. P. Root's model (1990); (2) W. Poston's model; (3) J. Jacobs's model (1992); and (4) F. Wardle's ecological and developmental model (1992). Some specific guidelines are given for counselors working with multiracial and multiethnic youth. These center around recognition of the unique nature of each child. The most important goal of counseling multiracial youth is to increase their awareness of their total heritage and to enhance the dignity and respect given that heritage. (Contains 10 references and 6 resources.) (SLD)

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Counseling Multiracial/Multiethnic Children

Paper presented at the New Millennium Mental Health Summit
Confewrence, Columbus, Ohio, June 2, 2000

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Counseling Multiracial/Multiethnic Children

Paper presented at the New Millennium Mental Health Summit Conference, Columbus, Ohio June 2, 2000, by Francis Wardle, Ph. D., Executive Director, Center for the Study of Biracial Children

Introduction

There are two central issues that must be addressed when counseling multiracial and multiethnic children in this country. First, in a country fixated on race, we only understand single-race group membership. We have no understanding of children who belong to more than one race. What are the unique needs, aspirations, strengths and challenges of children whose parents challenged this racial and ethnic divide? Second, multiracial children growing up in this country experience a constant variety of cues that tell them they don't belong and that they are different: stares; questions - well, what are you, anyway?; direct harassment; claims they are not Black (or Native American or Hispanic) enough; assumptions - usually by adults - that problems or challenges they might be facing are a direct result of their mixed-race status; insensitive teachers and counselors; accusations by minority peers of being disloyal and sellouts of their minority race; and automatic assumptions that they have strange parents- because only weird people would cross society's racial boundaries to marry.

Who are multiracial/multiethnic children?

The definition of this population is quite vague and fluid, because this country has never officially recognized children with mixed heritage - both through government categories, and through social labels. I define multiracial and multiethnic children as those whose parents or grandparents crossed traditional racial and ethnic lines to have children. While the most obvious example are children of Black/White parentage, Hispanic/Black parentage, and Japanese/White

parentage, this population also includes children whose parents are from different Native American nations, and children whose parents come from nations and groups within broad racial categories (say Japan and Vietnam). It must be noted here that these definitions, and issues around this unique population, are specific to the United States of America. Other countries categorize race and ethnicity very differently. For example, in Brazil multiracial and multiethnic people are part of their own official category, which is the largest population group in Brazil.

Identity Models

It is clear that multiracial and multiethnic children develop a sense of identity differently than do single race children. This appears to be a function both of the cognitive complexity of integrating various identities (often seemly contradictory), and the challenge of growing up in a society that emphasizes single race belonging, loyalty and affiliation - and that often puts down one racial group to enhance another one (Cruz-Janzen, 1997). Several theorists have proposed models to describe the development of racial identity in multiracial and multiethnic children. Here are several of these models.

Root's Model (1990)

M. P. P. Root (1990), believes that multiracial children choose one of four identities, and that any one of these can be satisfactory, if certain conditions are met. Further, Root believes that children change their identities, as they grow older, and as they change contexts

The 4 possible choices of a biracial identity are:

1. *The identity assigned by society*. This may change as the individual's environment changes, and it is flexible. This can be a positive choice if it is supported by the child's family, peers, and immediate society. As children change their contexts, they may change their identity.

2. *Identify with both racial groups*. This requires the child to operate effectively in each

group, as a full member of each group, and can be successful if the children does not have to radically change her personality when shifting from group to group.

3. *Identify with a single racial group.* The individual makes a conscious choice regarding which parent's group he/she will select. This can be successful if the child is accepted by the group, and if she does not reject the other side of her heritage.

4. *Identify with a mixed race group.* A child will identify with the totality of both parents heritages, although may slip between groups regarding friendships, associations, etc. Is successful if the child does not reject any of his/her heritage.

Developmental Models

The next three models are developmental models. A developmental model has two central components: the child must progress through a series of progressive stages in a given order; and the child must successfully complete each stage before progressing to the next one. If the earlier stages are not successfully completed, the child will have problems with a subsequent stage. For example, a children who has not explored diversity, racial identity, and multiracial identity in Stage One of Wardle's model, will struggle as an adolescent, in Stage Two.

All three developmental models view a healthy acceptance and integration of the child's total genetic, racial, cultural and historic heritage as the ultimate goal.

Poston's Model (1990)

1) *Personal identity.* Sense of self is independent of his/her ethnic/racial identity. A young child's sense of identity is not based on race or ethnicity. Rather its based on accomplishments, friends, and relationships with important adults (teachers and parents).

2) *Choice of group categorization.* Biracial youth are pressured to select one racial orientation. This choice is influenced by peer pressure and modeling of the parents. The choice

will be based on one of the child's biological parents. Limited cognitive ability will make it unlikely a biracial identity will be chosen

3) *Enmeshment Denial.* Youth experiences guilt confusion based on denying one side of their heritage. Positive resolution must be experienced to move forward, and important adults and resources need to assist the child in this effort.

4) *Appreciation.* While the child might still adhere to one identity, he/she moves to learn more about his/her second heritage. The child is beginning to accept both sides of his racial and cultural background.

5) *Integration.* The child resolves conflict and accepts integration of both heritages. A biracial Black/White child does not see herself has half Black and half White, but a total mixture of Black and White.

Jacobs's Model (1992)

Stage 1. Pre-Color Constancy: Play and Experimentation with Color (up to 4 ½ years old). Experiment with skin color and identity. This age child uses face painting, looking at themselves in the mirror, dressing up, putting on different wigs, and playing with their hair, to experiment with different roles, racial features, and possibilities. All children do this regarding gender identification.

Stage 2. Post-Color Constancy: Biracial Label and Racial Awareness. 4 ½ years old and up. The child realizes skin color is permanent, and begins to experience ambivalence and confusion regarding rejecting one side of their heritage; but the resolution leads to the next stage. Important adults in the child's life need to assist in this resolution.

Stage 3. Biracial Identity. Between age 8 and 12. Children learn that their color/features are from both parents, and that they have the combined heritage of both parents.

Wardle's Ecological and Developmental Model (1992)

Wardle's model adds an ecological component. In her work Root has also stressed the power of ecology on a multiracial child's identity development. More and more research suggest that, in this country, ecological components such as neighborhood, school, and family approach, directly impact a child's multiracial and multiethnic identity development.

2 Developmental Stages

1) Early stage (3-7). Experimenting with diversity; learning about same and different. The child at this age is learning that they are the same as their pees in certain respects; yet different in others. This is the age when the child begins to create their own unique identity.

2) Adolescent stage. Identity formation; racial group choices; friendships. This is the age when youth solidify their identities, through peer groups, values, ideas, music, and world view. For the multiracial and multiethnic adolescent,

> the primary developmental task..... is that of blending their multiple identities into a distinct solid identity that enables them to merge positive aspects of their varied backgrounds, acknowledges their uniqueness, and encourages a strong sense of self-worth. (Gibbs & Moskowitz-Sweet, 1991)

Ecological Components

1) Majority context

What is the child's relationship to White people, majority institutions, and media? How is this mediated? For example, if the child is raised in a Black environment that continually puts down Whites, the child's development will be affected.

2) Minority context

What's the child's involvement with people and communities that represent his minority background? Many biracial children are being raised by single White mothers in exclusively

white neighborhoods. How does this affect them differently that a child raised in an integrated neighborhood and attending an integrated school?

3) Community

Community includes neighborhood, school, child care, soccer, track, scouts, church and recreational opportunities. How many of these are integrated; how many race specific; how many defined by interest, ability or skill?

4) Family

Like all children being raised in this country today, multiracial children come from two parent homes, single parent homes, teen homes, grandparent homes, foster and adoptive homes, and blended families. The central issues for this model are: does the child have, in the nuclear and/or extended family, positive examples of people who represent both backgrounds; and how do the child's parents and other relatives support her multiracial and or multiethnic identity development?

5) Group antagonism

A reality in this country is that multiracial and multiethnic children experience considerable harassment, both from the majority group, and from the minority groups. This intensifies during adolescence. They are accused of being too White, trying to be better, being too Black, and being disloyal. This is also true of children with two minority heritages: say Black and Hispanic. Many Hispanic children are very prejudiced against Blacks, and give multiracial Black/Hispanic children a very difficult time (Cruz-Janzen, 1997).

Working with Multiracial Children in Counseling/Treatment

Professionals who work in treating multiracial children must begin by looking at their own acceptance of the existence of a healthy multiracial identity. They must examine their own

biases and cultural values. This examination includes all professionals, including professionals of color. Myths and stereotypes that professionals must explore within themselves include their views on interracial and interethnic families.

. Do they believe that interracial families won't last?

. Do they believe that these relationships are not based on love, but based on a variety of inappropriate motives (protest against society; sexuality; oppression; marrying the ideal woman, etc)?

.Do the believe that minorities who enter into relationships with Whites are sell-outs and disloyal to their communities?

.Do they believe that interracial families are somehow unnatural, marginal and extreme?

Myths and stereotypes that professionals must explore regarding views on multiracial and multiethnic children include:

Multiracial children will have psychological problems;

Multiracial adolescence- especially girls -are preoccupied with sexuality;

.Multiracial children don't fit in;

.All problems these children have are automatically a result of their mixed identity;

.Multiracial children don't have real friends;

Multiracial children must identify with their parent of color to develop a healthy identity.

The danger of working with multiracial children is to overemphasize the mixed racial background of clients, or to simple ignore it (Wehrly, Kenny & Kinney, 1999).

General Guidelines for Working with Multiracial Youth

(Wehrly, Kenney & Kenney, 1999)

1) Listen for strengths multiracial children bring to the situation. Give feedback based on these strengths.

2) Understand each mixed- race child is unique. Avoid stereotypical responses.

3) Encourage activities that help youth move toward full multiracial identity, including family support and cultural contacts.

4) Recognize multiracial identity is highly complex and fluid. Racial identity is not always high on the child's list. Changing contexts (school, clubs, college) will emphasize different parts of the child's identity.

5) Know the different identity models, but know none is totally correct. Ecological models are particularly helpful.

6) Use culturally sensitive listening. Multiracial youth often feel no one understands their unique experience. Some have never explored their complex identity with anyone. Others have learned to distrust professionals.

7) Assist multiracial youth to find support groups, resources, books, and web pages. The Rainbow Effect (Gay, 1987), and Of Many Colors: Portraits of Multiracial Families (Kaeser and Gillespie, 1997), are great books to use in therapy with multiracial children.

8) Explore issues around physical appearance and the perception of issues around physical appearance.

9) Listen for themes of confusion and a sense of victimization.

The most important goal of counseling multiracial youth is to increase their awareness of their total heritage, and to enhance the dignity and respect given that heritage. Counselors and therapists working with multiracial children must develop cross-cultural relationships. This means they must not only be culturally sensitive to the child's minority heritage, but also

responsive to the child's multiracial cultural identity. And, as I have suggested, since each multiracial child is unique, their cultural identity is also unique. This places a new and difficult challenge on therapists and counselors working with these children.

When working with multiracial children, treatment should focus on these aspects:

1) Validating their feelings about their multiracial status.

2) Supporting the development of a positive self-concept.

3) Assisting them in understanding the connection between problematic behaviors - the reason they are in treatment - and difficulties they might experience because of their mixed heritage.

4) Assisting them in exploring all aspects of their background, their abilities, and their strengths, in building a positive self-image.

Further, M. P. P. Root (1994), suggests counselors of multiracial children address 6 themes in working with these children. The first theme is uniqueness - the feeling of being different. Some multiracial children are supersensitive about this. The second theme is acceptance and belonging. Multiracial children often do not feel connected with traditional racial groups in society, and need help seeing how they are connected to other groups - religious, professional, hobbies, etc. The third theme Root mentions is physical appearance. Since this country is so fixated on race, and physical appearance is used as the main way to ascribe racial identity, physical appearance is often important to multiracial youth. Further, because they are often stared at and questioned regarding their physical appearance, it may be a heightened issue for them. The fourth theme is sexuality, especially for girls and women. One of the central myths about this population is that multiracial women are sexually promiscuous. Those seeking belonging and acceptance may fall for this myth. All of these themes combine to create the fifth

theme: self-esteem. Clearly the way children feel about themselves is a critical theme in therapy. And, finally, Root suggests counselors look at the child's identity: feeling of belonging, feeling of connectedness. It is very challenging for a child of racial and cultural groups that view each other in enmity, to find ways to connect with both groups. A full identity of multiracial youth involves a flexibility and positive exposure to all parts of their heritage.

Conclusion

Multiracial and multiethnic children are a new population with whom helping professionals are increasing coming into contact. Most counselors and therapists are not trained or prepared to work effectively with these children. To effectively work in treatment settings with multiracial and multiethnic children, professionals must first explore their own biases and prejudices regarding this population. Next they must familiarize themselves with the various identity development models, especially those with ecological components. And finally, they must view as a central goal of therapy the need to help multiracial and multiethnic children explore and accept the strengths of their unique statues, and embrace their total racial, cultural, and historical heritage.

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New People Online Magazine: www.newpeoplemagazine.com

Center for the Study of Biracial Children: www.csbc.cncfmily.com

Interracial Voice: www.webcom.~intvoice/

Magazine

InterRace
P.O. Box 17479
Beverly Hills, CA 90209
(310) 358-2932

Books

Counseling Multiracial Families, by B. Wehrly, K. R. Kenney and Mark E. Kenney. Sage publications

Tomorrow's Children: Meeting the Needs of Multiracial and Multiethnic Children at Home, in Early Childhood Programs, and at School, by Francis Wardle. CSBC